

2016

## Threshold

Leah V

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### Recommended Citation

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THRESHOLD

Leah V





## Threshold

This senior thesis details an exploration by Leah V into spaces and places in time—be they emotional or physical—in which an important boundary has been crossed, thereby removing the possibility of returning to that space or place. The critical introduction for this collection of poems by Leah V focuses on the esteemed voices of Robert Penn Warren and Seamus Heaney, two men whose poetry has been, and continues to be, highly influential in Leah's own poetic quest.

Original poems have been edited by, and revised under the guidance of, Dr. Nick Norwood, Professor of English at Columbus State University, and Director of the Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians.

This research was funded in part by a Student Research and Creative Endeavors Grant from Columbus State University.

Leah V would like to thank Alan Shapiro and the members of her workshop at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center for providing meaningful guidance, inspiration, and encouragement.

Threshold

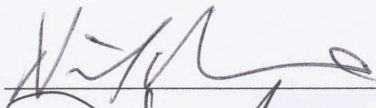
Leah V

A senior thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the undergraduate program and English Department  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English with a concentration in creative writing  
College of Letters and Sciences

Columbus State University  
December 2016

Presented by Leah V

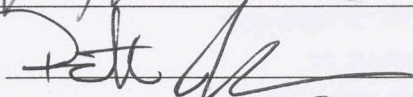
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What have I heard; What can I make heard?

Every soul is valuable in God's sight, and the story of every soul is the story of its self-definition for good or evil, salvation or damnation ... Each of us longs for full balance and responsibility in self-knowledge, in a recognition and harmonious acceptance of our destiny. Saints and sages may achieve that harmonious sense of destiny ... But we lesser and more fumbling mortals may find at least some intimation of it in the unfolding patterns, however modest, of our own effort toward knowledge.

— Robert Penn Warren

More than two decades'-worth of largely unexamined moments compose what I casually refer to as my life experience, as if I truly know and understand it all—as if these moments innately belong to me, and permit me some authority in the larger conversation among the living and the once-living. I have passed hundreds of hours asserting my existence and asking myself what I know with Descartes, deconstructing my world with Derrida, hunting beauty with the Romantics, evaluating science and religion with Newton, learning to balance freedom and propriety with the Victorians, increasingly losing my center with the Modernists and Post-modernists, and considering forgetting it all and acting on my wildest envies with Nietzsche. I initially believed that someone or some collective was going to supply me with a dogma, with “the answers.” I was wrong, and overwhelmed. I then believed that by studying, absorbing, and analyzing the quests of others, I could ultimately draw well-educated conclusions for myself about the Truth we communally crave—and I was at an even greater loss. It was only when I began writing poetry that I became capable of escaping passive living, perpetual inquiry, and voicelessness.

It would be foolish to imply that studying past ideologies is insignificant, but perhaps even more foolish to imagine that the knowledge they contain is at all necessary to the conception of a poet. Some persons argue that a poet's outcome is predetermined—that it is possible to quantify the inherent capability a person might have to practice poetry, but I staunchly disagree; where there is a competence for language, there is an avenue for poetry. In his book, *The Poet's Art*, the critic, teacher, and author M.L. Rosenthal professes that:



Poets are thrice-born at least: first, when they discover in themselves a love of the sounds of language and desire to make attractive shapes with them; next, when they come alive to the riches of the speech around them; and third when they realize they have let themselves in for practicing an art and not merely recording what they hear or 'expressing themselves.' (29)

Note that two of the three stages of this process are unconcerned with scholarly studies, or even with the physical act of writing, but rather with auditory awareness and comprehension.

I cannot claim that I was aware, at the time I was exposed to them as a child, of the influences that various oral stories would have on my adult perceptions and beliefs. When considering the childhoods of my greatest poetic influences, I cannot say for certain if, when Seamus Heaney imbibed the sounds of the countryside and the concerned voices of adults on radio broadcasts, or when Robert Penn Warren internalized the various noises of labor on the tobacco farm and his Grandfathers' stories of the Civil War, either boy in some way actively catalogued these noises either. I can say that I am sure that these auditory experiences provided the foundations for the kinds of stories we would eventually tell, and just as meaningfully as our very different academic experiences did.

In the poems of *Threshold*, I often return to characters, places, and emotions from my childhood. I have been taught, and I have advocated, that childhood experiences provide so fruitfully for the act of writing because sensory impressions are new and thus powerful at this stage of life; but prior to this study, I believe that I failed to realize how much of that phenomenon is auditory. In his essay "Something to Write Home About," Seamus Heaney uses the word "hoke" as an example of an auditory trigger that returns him "to the very first place in [him]self"; he says it is "undislodgeably there, buried in the very foundations of [his] own speech. Under [him] like the floor of the house where [he] grew up" (53). Warren also recognizes this correlation between noises, language, childhood, and poetry when he says, "All babies like it. La-la-la, as they like their thumbs and toes, they like making sounds. And the next step is writing a



sonnet" (89). I have considered the sounds of my upbringing, as well as the varying manipulations of sound by Heaney and Warren, while composing and revising this collection of poems. I have made an effort to study the sounds of individual words, whole lines, complete stanzas, and full poems.

Regarding the manipulation of the sounds of words and lines, I admire no one more than Seamus Heaney. I find his poems to be some of the most thrilling to recite due to the various shapes and sounds I am required to make. Over the course of my studies, I became interested in how Heaney developed and nurtured this masterful crafting of sound, and I was fortunate enough to have Dr. Daniel Ross direct me towards a very detailed article concerning the language in Heaney's early poetry. In "The Keats and Hopkins Dialectic in Seamus Heaney's Early Poetry: 'The Forge,'" Richard Rankin Russell charts the influences of the sounds of Keats and Hopkins in Heaney's works (44-49). He discusses Keats's more feminine, and "narcotic" sounds in contrast to Hopkins's masculine and "loaded" sounds (46). He argues that a mixture of these sounds, beginning with Keats's rounded *oo's* and *uh's* and later adding the *slaps* and *smacks* of Hopkins, facilitated the eventual emergence of Heaney's own sound. Rankin states that Heaney has "affirm[ed] both poets' early influence on him," and that "Heaney indulges in a Keatsian vocabulary of luxuriousness and sensuousness while also pitching his poetry with a Hopkinsesque intensity" (46). Incidentally, these details provide an example of a thorough account of Rosenthal's first and second births of the poet, in which he awakens to and begins molding sounds to suit his own desires.

One of the poems that jumps quickly to the forefront of my mind when I again reflect on this article is Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist." Every single word in this 33-line-long poem carries a weight or an elegance that self-justifies. We can see examples of this in singular words like "frogspawn," "jampotfuls," "gargled," "flax-dam," "or "clotted"—these words create harsh, Hopkinsesque and gentle Keatsian noises, even out of the context of the lines they belong to. I find an especially beautiful blend of Heaney's influences towards the beginning of the poem, in lines 5-15, which say:

Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles



Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.

There were dragonflies, spotted butterflies,

But best of all was the warm thick slobber

Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water

In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring

I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied

Specks to range on window-sills at home,

On shelves at school, and wait and watch until

The fattening dots burst into nimble-

Swimming tadpoles.

There is a rich variety of alliteration and consonance in words like "bubbles," "bluebottles," and "butterflies," as well as "jampotfuls," "jellied," and "range," or "wait and watch." There is also a beautiful juxtaposition of noises and ideas in lines like "bubbles gargled delicately," where we have the soft, silky image of bubbles, and the violent "b" and "g" consonants, followed by the word "delicately." Similarly, there is a lovely end-rhyme between the grungy word "slobber" and the pure word "water" while discussing the growth of new life. Even when the "fattening dots burst into nimble- / Swimming tadpoles," it is apparent that there is an explosion followed by a gracefulness that Heaney alone, in my opinion, expertly captures on the page.

In "Holy Communion," I attempt to create pleasing and interesting sounds in my own voice. Lines 2-4 may serve as an example here:

the giddy girls of St. Catherine of Siena lined up

at the blackboard to practice receiving the Body of Christ.

Twelve years old and barely budding beneath our sweaters,

we stared at Sister Anne Marie's stiff habit and soft jowls



Following my close studies of Heaney's poetry, I have been working on juxtaposing dissimilar ideas while keeping them married through sound, as might be seen in "we stared at Sister Anne Marie's stiff habit and soft jowls"; the repetition of the "s" noise throughout the line maintains an overall unity, despite the contrast in subject matter between the stiff habit and the soft jowls. In this excerpt, I, too, happen to have fallen into alliterations of "g" and "b" sounds, as seen in "giddy girls" and "barely budding beneath," which was not an intentional emulation of Heaney's work but does illustrate that even as an adult, exposure to sound is still influencing my development as a poet.

While the pool of my experience differs from that which Heaney told his own stories from, the sounds I am using in the present to represent those being recalled are still malleable, which cultivates in me a sense of value in the countless hours I spent building an academic repertoire and exposing myself to eras' worth of ideologies. The sense of "self" that I inherently create when I write poetry reveals to me why story-telling has been such an essential element for human existence—and it does so with a finality that I could not comprehend by simply studying and analyzing literature; in the face of the severe threat of being a meaningless entity in the end, it encourages me to continue my practices in the poetic and literary fields.

Upon first contact, the poems of Seamus Heaney and Robert Penn Warren adhered to that emotional part of me that I decisively, and now undoubtedly, think of as my "self"; this deep sensation of connection happens as I am reading their poems, even for the very first time, albeit for differing reasons. If other poems are songs that I must listen to more than once, to varying degrees, in order to appreciate and sing-along with them, the poems of Heaney and Warren are the songs that I know I will love within the first few notes. Whereas Heaney's poetry fascinates me with the potential musicality of language itself, Warren's poetry begs me to contemplate the way in which my message is being delivered, and thus "heard" by the reader.

For the purposes of this discussion, I can think of no better Warren poem to analyze than "Tell Me a Story." In this two-part poem, Warren manages a discussion of sound in a way that is paced as a



traditional story might be paced, yet doesn't fail to exist as a distinct poem with an admirable balance between the immediate subject matter and the larger message. As John Lewis Longely, Jr. states in his critical introduction to *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "Warren's passion has always been not merely to document the characteristic experiences of our time, but above all else to give them meaning in a largely meaningless world" (xiii). I would absolutely say that Heaney, too, relates local experience to universal truth—I think this is a necessity for any successful and valuable work of literature—but I simply feel that Warren's delivery, and maybe even content in some ways, more closely resembles the poetic voice I am refining for myself.

In part A of "Tell Me a Story," the speaker of the poem is recollecting a childhood experience that took place at night on a dirt road, in which he heard "the great geese hoot northward" (3). He emphasizes the sound, saying, "I could not see them, there being no moon / And the stars sparse. I heard them" (4-5). There is, as in Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist," alliteration within these lines—the "great geese," and "stars sparse"—but Warren, unlike Heaney, pointedly takes away the sensation of sight in order to highlight the auditory experience, and he does so by presenting an idea, rather than choosing intense diction to capture the scene. He further increases the desolation of the scene, and thus amplifies the sound to an even greater extent, in lines 6-9 when he says:

I did not know what was happening in my heart.

It was the season before the elderberry blooms.

Therefore they were going north.

The sound was passing northward.

After creating physical darkness by stripping this event of moon and stars, leaving only the boy and the minimally-referenced dirt road beneath his feet, Warren creates an emotional void by admitting that he did



not know what was happening at the time; he was incapable of emotionally reacting in the moment. This creates a further sense of silence, outside of the hooting geese. As if even mentioning the idea of a heart was too expressive and divergent from the tangible elements of the memory, Warren again describes the physical setting, providing the detail that there is not even vegetation in this moment—all is barren, as is reflected in the white space between his lines. In the final line, he ends part A with a focus on the sound again. This method of delivery seems almost minimalist in comparison to Heaney's diction, but it exemplifies a very different way for "larger ideas" to thrive in tandem with sensation and singular, personal incidents.

A sample of this sensory and lingual simplicity may be seen in my poem "Ache," in lines 1-6:

It is only when I am bitterly cold in my bones,  
 standing in the half-light of a February evening in Connecticut,  
 staring into the sapphire depth of my closet  
 that I am haunted by a sudden draft of chlorine  
 unfurling from my strawberry one-piece  
 which lies limp in a crushed box in the corner,

While there is alliteration among the words "standing," "staring," "sapphire," "sudden," and "strawberry," the overall language is not particularly complex or thickly layered with sounds that are calling excess attention to themselves. In a coincidence that works nicely for this analysis, I, too, have somewhat removed the visual sensations from this poem; despite "staring" into the closet, the speaker is standing in "half-light," and the subject of her visual field is a "sapphire depth"—something that I hope connotes a deep, rich, darkness which the human eye can barely capture. This sensation of being largely in the dark allows for the smell of chlorine unfurling to assume a more prominent position, perhaps even being visualized by the reader as a tangible, smoke-like curl of scent traveling towards the speaker in the darkness. I hope that,



as in Warren's poem, the subtler sounds of the language in "Ache" allow for not only a sensory experience, but also a readily accessible comprehension of the universal message about longing and childhood.

The theme for *Threshold* was conceived shortly after a brouhaha which inspired the poem "Expletive." I had been verbally accosted by someone I love, and I, being a creature of minimal social interaction, had already exhausted my emotional support system (read: my mother) when I sat down, incensed and ready to write. Prior to that moment, my poetry had primarily been about nature, food, and nostalgia, and yet there I was, pen in hand, contemplating the terrifically horrible consequences of an auditory experience: hearing the words "fuck you."

I recalled the exact noises of each of the letters in as much detail as I could. I let the "f" rush out from the small, dark space between those lips in a focused, pregnant gust and I thought about the hateful slap in the "uck." I wondered if there was less confidence in the message by the time the "y" swooped around to the sweet "u," lips puckered as if ready to kiss. I searched for hints of regret in my recollection of the sounds until I realized that it did not matter; any intention or remorse was an excess to the reality: those sounds permanently changed the dynamic of the relationship. I needed to capture the threshold of this change, to explore how quickly it was crossed, and to examine what the spaces before and after that instant looked like, as well. I wrote the poem I needed to write, and I immediately wanted to do it again.

With my newfound interest in these micro-moments and the environments surrounding them, I began to write and revise with the goal of detailing spaces and places in time which I could not return to—moments in which a boundary had been crossed; moments that I claimed as my experiences, but which suddenly felt unrealized, underappreciated, and unfamiliar. Each of the poems in the following collection began with a thought about a single moment in my life. Sometimes the recollection seemed insignificant until I explored it, and other times, too immense to verbalize with clarity and concision. I needed counsel, and when thinking about boundaries, sound, and poetry that remains refined in the face of complex thought and overwhelming emotion, I knew immediately which poets I wanted to guide me.



Closely studying the poetry and philosophies of Seamus Heaney and Robert Penn Warren has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my academic career. In my career as a poet, I have no doubt that their words will continue to influence and shape my sounds and practices. I have deserted my imagination only in that I no longer believe that a greater thinker than I might supply me with a truth that will bring me peace about the bittersweet weight of existence; I have in every other respect fed my imagination and allowed it to grow, untamed, in poetry—the one way I can provide for myself, and perhaps be someone else's influence one day, but hopefully never their source for answers.

Now more than ever, I believe that exposing oneself to knowledge is a part of the process of creating great art, regardless of whether that learning process begins before, after, or concurrently with the production of said art. While writing the poems that are becoming *Threshold*, I never once sat down to purposefully emulate a Heaney or Warren piece, and yet, I can find traces of the elements I admire about their work in my own poems—sometimes very overtly. I conducted multiple hours of research, consistently finding one wise quote after another from the minds of Heaney and Warren, fretting about which ones meant most to me, which to share, and yet I have shared so few of them directly. I can only hope that the messages I have absorbed from them are in some way relayed in my own thoughts and words, allowing me to be folded into the larger conversation, which is what I ultimately desire for my work to withstand in the end.

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## Holy Communion

In dark plaid skirts and white knee-high socks,  
the giddy girls of St. Catherine of Siena lined up  
at the blackboard to practice receiving the Body of Christ.  
Twelve years old and barely budding beneath our sweaters,  
we stared at Sister Anne Marie's stiff habit and soft jowls  
as she warned us of the infernal depths below  
where I imagined we would forever be mauled  
by packs of powerful hellhounds  
if we ever practiced receiving the body of man.  
I'm sure I felt them tearing into my flesh, years later  
as the fire burned beneath me, and I bleated *stop*,  
and my tongue tasted of ash and unleavened bread.

## Kick the Can

Beneath a watchful, whitesmoke  
babymoon, late sun and sky deliver  
pink girls and blue boys in knit caps  
while we meet in the underbrush of the treeline.

Sopping, translucent cotton t-shirts cling  
to our nipples; we breathe each other's heat;  
hardwood mulch compacts beneath our bare, calloused feet.  
The others, their footfalls thrumming below,

must know we will not try until the porch light  
at the concrete stoop brightens in the falling night  
around our allies who sit in jail, captured  
one at a time. Screaming out your name, they plead  
for release — I feel your lips whispering mine.



## The Reservoir

Our eyes strain as though we have not blinked  
in some time, and I have been seeing you.

Air like the earth of an Indian summer swells  
from your nose.

One by one the blond hairs  
at the nape of my neck dry and rise.

My breasts stick to your chest.

I am a cold, damp leaf to the concrete  
amid a December mist in the Deep South.

My spine faces up; my color faces you.

I am ugly, opaque, exposed, fragile.

The dense bones of my pelvis compress yours. We sustain  
a small reservoir like a dip in the sidewalk  
after a heavy April rain. I had been seeing you—  
Sturdy. Concise. Purposeful. Unmoving.

I have fallen on you now and I see you:

a single, grey, passionless slab I have seen before.

## Expletive

As you extend that fleshy, fricative "F," I know what comes next.  
 I am young again, reliving all my private catastrophes  
 as if I am thumbing through the crisp cards of my rolodex  
 looking for the precise place to sort your entry.

I am being kicked in the stomach by a playmate turned competitor for my mother's attention  
 Or, I am sitting on a snowbank  
     and I've just had my sweaty palm torn from the clasp  
     of the only blue-eyed boy I've ever loved  
     because I am moving,  
     and it turns out that balloon-string handcuffs are ineffectual  
     in the face of adults with scissors  
 Or, I have been gone for mere months  
     and Lauren has abandoned me even though I loved her  
     when she showed up in my second grade class  
     with a brown tooth and a plain, Midwestern dialect  
 Or, I am squeezing the unbearably false slickness of my nylon basketball uniform  
     in fists at my hips,  
     attempting to gather anything  
     just after the Foley girl and her cohorts tell me a joke so sad,  
     I finally realize I *am* the joke  
 Or, on a final day of the school year,  
     I am walking into the gymnasium  
     and in the echo of a venomous voice I hear my name,  
     and even my brother is laughing,  
     until he sees me  
 Or, the clapping of my chunky skate shoes  
     cannot quite muffle the word "dyke"  
     as my beautiful girlfriend and I hold hands on the way to class,  
     and I want to whisk her pixie frame from the floor  
     and let her dark, endless hair billow behind us,  
     engulfing and enshrouding the school until we are safe,  
     but we will never be safe

Or my mother tells me that my father doesn't love me, and he doesn't dispute the claim.

Somewhere between the "F" and the "U,"  
 I have entered Robert Penn Warren's no-Time  
 and I have found that he is right—  
 this is truly where we die.  
 I have died so many times now,  
 I find it hard to believe that at one point  
 I will die without watching it happen.



## How New England Feels

The lone, black bird I was  
has erupted into a plume of hundreds,  
dispersed by the bellow of an unnamed boat  
in the Provincetown Harbor.

## Playing Cards

Tables we've gathered around  
 populate a sweeping showroom in my mind  
 and I am now walking through  
 den, after porch, after family room,  
 after kitchen and kitchen and kitchen,  
 as if I am strolling through Ikea  
 on any rainy Saturday.

This den looks cheap, but by God!  
 Next to Father's empty, cream La-Z-Boy  
 the stout, round table is so sturdy.  
 The children will sit on pillows  
 and play Go Fish with weary babysitters—  
 or their mother, on days that they are lucky

enough to be sick. She will hug them  
 tighter, and longer when Father is not home.  
 This screened-in porch will be refurnished,  
 outgrown, sold. For now, there is a lower-middle class,  
 Irish Catholic family: three young children  
 playing Mille Bornes around a wicker-framed glass-top  
 with their laughing, pregnant mother,  
 crunching on potato chips—  
 oily fingers staining all the cards.

This family room is surely rented:  
 a summer home at the Cape.  
 A nicked and scratched darkwood six-top  
 where the family plays Rummy 500 at night,  
 sips on fizzy Sprites  
 while lightning strikes  
 violently beyond a large bay window.

This is where they live.  
 A lodge-style kitchen in the deep South.  
 Space enough for the banquet table  
 Mom always wanted; no one left  
 to fill the chairs. On a quiet night,  
 the six will play Spoons and realize  
 that Mom and Dad aren't really fighting  
 over a missing playing card at all.  
 And the house, the house, the house will fall.



## Ache

It is only when I am bitterly cold in my bones,  
 standing in the half-light of a February evening in Connecticut,  
 staring into the sapphire depth of my closet  
 that I am haunted by a sudden draft of chlorine  
 unfurling from my strawberry one-piece  
 which lies limp in a crushed box in the corner, and I will  
 ravage the hollow to bring that worn lycra to my nose  
 like a hungry squirrel reclaiming a forgotten acorn.

## Transported

A single breath, and my mind whirls to life  
a zoetrope of old men  
with hair thickened by wisps of cigar smoke  
I can smell now,  
seasoning the glistening crinkle-cut fries  
that landed on my tongue  
one by one at baseball fields lit  
up by towering lights so bright  
a boundary of night  
made a shoebox of Unity Park  
and its men, whose only love  
was Real American Baseball.

Perhaps I was thinking  
of raffle tickets and sunflower seeds  
before I stepped out into the tepid night air  
of the drug store parking lot.  
Maybe the flickering of the window-front sign  
is reminding me of the glint of coins dropped  
by children buying sweets  
at the snack-stand below my perch  
where I can hear myself announce,  
*Now batting, number nine.*

In this derelict parking lot  
where mosquitos borrow my blood,  
bubblegum highlights the zigzags  
of my soles, pulling  
up with the same resistance  
it had during hot summers,  
years before, at Indian Ledge Park  
or the fields in Middletown, and I  
am enamored of the darkness,  
the carcinogens, the hunger, the magic—  
the infinite rattle of bleachers  
beneath the shoes of adults who could never know  
of the blissful children lurking below.



## Bless Me, Father, For I Have Sinned

So many times in so many handsome, white dresses, I have been saved.  
Holy men have bathed me, fed me, named me—  
touched me on my head, where halos of baby's breath lay.  
The soft mothers and stern Sisters by whose breasts and hands I was raised  
could certainly not have made it through their days  
without the Holy man's guidance, and the Holy man's ways.  
I must now bear my soul, do with it what they may  
in this hallowed room so dark that my secrets should feel safe.

## Preparation

I will never need to close my eyes  
to see my mother's body swaying to "Passionate Kisses."

On hazy mornings, I brew strong coffee I won't drink;  
her voice breathes about my ears in the steam-filled gurgling.

A rippling newspaper; a pair of soft worn clogs; arctic eyes  
like two saviors, beacons in the night.

I stalk tag sales in a long white Cadillac,  
like we used to.

Spend all my petty cash on our favorites:  
lace tablecloths, Longaberger, and grubby globes.

Ornate lamps that cast dim light in my apartment filled  
with clocks whirring and ticking and cooing. My clocks. My mother's clocks. My mother's mother's  
clocks.

As my mother prepares, I prepare. Teas and herbal remedies. Tears and lavender oils. Fresh fruits and  
daily walks. *My friend's mother is dying of cancer and she uses this and it really helps her.*  
We use it.

I sit, calligraphing names, numbers, addresses  
into a brown telephone book, a golden telephone embossed on the cover.

The doctor calls. I pick up and hear my mother's voice say Hello?



## Animus

One mighty, mighty fight.  
We are now a flashing yellow light  
at a dead intersection in the middle of the night.

## Monsignor O'Shea, Please Relay

Dear God, I can't help but wonder what you think of me  
for shirking the Blood of Christ this week  
because the woman in tweed the aisle opposite me  
let out sneeze after sneeze as we neared the sacred altar.  
When I returned to my seat, feeling guilt and relief,  
was I only half as holy as the parishioners surrounding me?

Dear God, I can't help but wonder what my choices mean  
and if I've grown up, or if I can still believe.



## Valhalla, NY

- For the family I love, all of whom still buzz around in my mind as we did around 353 Columbus Avenue: Lindsay, Timmy, Tracy, Ian, Graham, Tara, Sean, Thomas, Luke, Jesse, Shane, & Kyle

### I. Uncle Timmy

Queen Pauline's vibrato buzzes about long, glass honeycombs  
filled with ginger snaps and marshmallows.  
The screened door slaps shut at my back.  
Wedged beside the Radarange,  
last to be smothered in the long greeting line,  
I am tight-eyed and trying to hide  
when my Uncle Timmy flips me  
round asking, *How'd you get so pretty?*  
I wonder what he would ask me,  
what all those expectant eyes would hope to see  
if they were still looking at me.

### II. Uncle Tommy

Aunt Kris is not to be found;  
she's in their big white split-level  
in Caramel, with another man.  
UT wears a black turtle neck.  
His eyelids flutter while he says hello.  
One of his teeth looks whiter  
than the rest, and his crowded smile  
overwhelms me as we lean  
in for a hug. He bends back, hands  
clasped as if he hopes  
he is not in the way.  
I don't mind if he takes up space.

### IV. Aunt Colleen

I wonder if the tremors  
began to build in her body  
while she sat among the lace throws  
of the living room; quiet, kind-eyed.  
Dark pixie hair and a long, gentle witch's nose.  
The same laugh lines as my mother's  
made me want to hug her,  
and I should have always taken the chance.

## III. Aunt Barbara

sits at the circular Hitchcock dining table placed  
 square beneath the pendant light's stained-glass canopy.  
 The same, red, woven sweater.  
 She gives me a bump-cheek kiss,  
 and I wonder how her face  
 is so flushed but not warm. She picks  
 from plates of fruit, Clubs and Cabarets,  
 muenster wedges. Her voice rings  
 around the hanging copper molds—  
 a lobster; a fish; a bushel of grapes  
 in which I now see my own face,  
 as I strain to recall the sound of my family.

## V. Uncle Peter

In a congested family room that was once a foyer,  
 clocks dance and many mirrors reflect his long dimples,  
 hugging roseate cheeks—an unmistakable Santa Claus;  
 it is truly Christmas when he smiles. He stands,  
 always a beverage in his hands,  
 watches a Mets game with Al  
 on a brown-paneled TV  
 that nearly blocks the long-unused front door.  
 I do not know how much time he spent  
 among all those antiques and patterned wallpapers,  
 or whether he even liked 353,  
 but I know I felt at home there, each time he spoke to me.

## VI. Aunt Jeri Lee

Somewhere in her house down the double-drive,  
 Jeri Lee is laughing. Ice tinkles around her glass  
 of Dewar's and ginger ale.  
 Her feet, like matchboxes in thin black socks  
 and plush black clogs, raise from the floor  
 while her mauve La-Z-Boy rocks back  
 beneath her weight, and her eyes crest closed  
 behind petri dish glasses.  
 I almost wish I did not see her that one last time,  
 sitting pallid and out of her mind in a wheelchair  
 just weeks from dying—just days after our Queen died.



## VII. Aunts Donna and Carol, Uncles Ken and Bob, Cousins Chris and Lisa

Their faces are familiar, but they are largely names to me.  
 A woman whose eyes never meet mine  
 in the same way they must meet those of her beloved horses.  
 An Asian man I assume to be the reason they've moved from New York.  
 Their gentle son, Chris, many years my senior,  
 and the only person I know to have taken paternity leave.  
 Carol, a pair of short-heeled white pumps,  
 a red wrap-dress, and a face cream-caked like fashionable icing.  
 Bob the bus driver, with his exquisitely smooth olive head  
 and a dark, thick bend of moustache.  
 Lisa: body-builder, West Point grad, FBI employee.  
 Sometimes, child-like, I imagine her repelling into a criminal's house,  
 busting in the windows, clad in combat boots and an official jacket,  
 and I see no relation to me —  
 but somehow it is enough to know they all are family.

## VIII. Uncle Jim

The sliding door suckers open  
 to a sunporch whose floor of Peter Pan green  
 synthetic grass is never-ending, crunching  
 like grains of sand from a broken hourglass  
 beneath our feet.  
 Jim stands among my sitting uncles  
 with a long cigarette burning down to his knuckles.  
 Phlegm catches in his throat  
 at the punchline of his joke—the same suffocating smoke  
 that choked King Robert to death.  
 I inhale deep and exhale slow.

## IX. Time

The cuckoo clock mocks its unyielding reminder:  
 another whole hour, gone. Too late,  
 I scramble inside the hive, stockings sliding on soft,  
 slick linoleum. "I didn't see the bird,"  
 I coo. Someone I love simply spins back the hand  
 and makes it happen again.



